Essential Guide to Home Safety for Seniors

STAY ON YOUR FEET.
PREVENT HOME FALLS.
Dear Customer,

In our youth and middle age, we are constantly on the go. We carry small children and heavy groceries in our arms, climb counters to reach high shelves, run downstairs to answer the door, and rush around the house doing chores. When we’re young, it’s all easy, effortless and done without a second thought to health and safety. As an older adult, some of these same everyday tasks are much more difficult and can even put us at risk of an accidental slip or fall, which can cause severe injuries. Accidental falls are one of the most serious health problems facing seniors today!

Some Quick Facts

• Every year, one in three of us, age 65 and older will fall and experience the pain of hip fractures, head injuries and even early death.

• At least one-third of all falls in the elderly involve environmental hazards in the home.

• The risk of falling increases with age and is greater for women than for men.

• 66% of those who experience a fall, will fall again within six months.

Among these alarming statistics, there is some good news! Falls are, for the most part, a preventable health problem. And there’s simple steps you can take to avoid the risk of slips, falls and the injuries that go with them.

In this booklet, we take you through

• Risk factors for falling and some preventative measures you can take.

• A Home Safety Checklist

• Assistive Devices that can help your mobility.

• Simple lifestyle changes you can make with respect to exercise, diet, medication awareness, and vision care to help you stay safe.
The more you know, the better prepared you will be to take action to prevent a fall, and to react safely and calmly to get the help you need if you do fall. As part of your health care team, it’s an important part of our mission to help you get the information you need to stay independent, safe, and steady on your feet!
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Are You At Risk For A Fall?

Please read the following questions and answer them by checking Yes or No.

Have you ever fallen before?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Are you 65 or over?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Do you experience difficulty or dizziness when getting up from a chair?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Do you feel unsteady reaching for objects overhead or on the ground?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Have you noticed a decline in your vision or hearing?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Do you have weak muscles or stiff joints?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Do you have any condition that affects feeling in your feet or ankles?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Are you on four or more medications?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Do you frequently drink alcohol?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Do you experience difficulty sleeping?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Are there hazards in or around your home?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Have you had a recent illness or injury that has caused a lifestyle change?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Have you been diagnosed with any chronic neurological condition or other serious medical problems?
☐ Yes
☐ No

The more “Yes” answers you have above, the greater your risk for a fall. But you can take control of your environment, health and lifestyle to lower that risk and stay safe. In this booklet, you will find many suggestions for becoming more health conscious and making your home safer so that you and your loved ones can stay vital, independent and on your feet!
PERSONAL SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS
Staying Safe with Safety Aids

Walkers, Canes and Crutches

- **What’s it for?** A cane can improve your balance as you walk or help you compensate for an injury or disability.

- **What kind of cane should you choose?** If you need the cane only for balance, consider a standard cane with a single tip. If you need the cane to bear weight, you might choose an offset cane with four tips.

- **Check Tips and Treads:** Choose canes with a rubber tip at the end. Make sure the rubber tips and treads on your cane, crutch and/or walker wheels are not dry, cracked or worn down.

- **Winter Safety:** In winter, affix an "ice pick" on the end of your cane so it doesn’t skid on icy sidewalks. Choose an ice pick with four or five prongs for optimal ice grip. An ice pick-fitted cane is an extra support while navigating winter sidewalks.

- **Keep it Dry!** When coming back indoors with your cane or walker, always wipe the wheels or rubber tips dry.

- **Sizing Your Cane:** Use a walking aid that is actually measured for your height.

These instructions will assist you in creating a comfortable fit with your cane or walker. You can also ask your health care professional or physical therapist for assistance.

Get a friend or family member to help you measure yourself so they can make sure you are standing correctly.

**STEP 1** Wear your regular shoes, and take measurements on a hard surface, like a wood or ceramic floor (not carpet). Stand upright in a relaxed stance.

**STEP 2** Choose the hand you will use to hold your cane.

Normally it is the opposite hand from your injured side but in some cases it is the same hand. Talk to your healthcare provider or physiotherapist to determine the right side to use.

Your arm should hang loosely at your side, and you should have a natural bend to your elbow when you’re standing.

If measured correctly, the final bend to your elbow when walking with your cane will be approximately 15 – 20 degrees. Your arms shouldn’t be straight, but also not overly bent.

**STEP 3** How to measure a cane.

With your elbow at the natural 15 – 20 degree bend, measure from the floor to the centre of the wrist/watchband.

- **Keep Your Cane Handy at Night:** Keeping a cane or walker by your bedside can help you walk at night even though you may not use one during the day.

- **Walk in Style!** Who says you have to choose a traditional cane? Nowadays there is a wider and more fashionable selection of canes to choose from than ever before.
Think of your cane as an accessory and find one that fits your personality.

**Reaching Aids**

- **What’s it for?** Reaching aids can help when you have trouble reaching high or bending low for tasks around the house. Many have suction cups or magnets on the end for extra grip. It will allow you to pick up even the smallest light items from the floor and higher cupboards. Note: Not for use with heavy items.

- If you must reach up to do high jobs, do it safely. Do not use a regular kitchen chair or any other furniture. Instead get a foldable step stool with a handrail, to keep in your kitchen or pantry for such purposes.

**Wheeled Walkers**

- **What’s it for?** Just as it sounds, a wheeled walker is a support device to try if you have trouble with walking short distances or balance. Rollator walkers have a seat you can use to sit and rest, and a basket for light items like your purse or the mail.

- Never use walkers to pull yourself up, as they may tip over. Instead, use the arms of a chair for extra support.

- Talk to your health care professional for more information about walkers and other mobility devices.

**Sock and Shoe Aids**

- **What’s it for?** If you have trouble putting on shoes and socks, aids like long-handled shoehorns, sock aids, elastic laces, velcro strips, and shoe removers can be helpful and save you from bending over and straining to perform these tasks.

**Chair Risers and Lifts**

- **What’s it for?** If you are having difficulties rising up from a chair, contact your local home healthcare vendor for information on devices such as chair risers, electric lift chairs and safety poles to assist you with these actions. Choose a firm higher chair with arms to make it easier to sit and stand.

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Staying Healthy and Active

While we all hear those stories of the 80 year old who runs marathons, many of us are not as physically fit as we’d like to be. Whether you’ve been involved in sports and fitness your entire life, or are just starting now on the advice of a doctor, it’s important to progress at your own pace and ability. Whatever your current physical condition, you can engage in some form of physical activity with the help of your doctor. Being active can help you look better, feel better, reduce your risk of a fall or other injury and stay independent.

10 Benefits of Active Living and Physical Fitness

- Reduce your risk of falling
- More flexible joints
- Stronger bones and muscles
- Improved balance and endurance
- Better heart and lung function
- Improve conditions like osteoporosis and gain more mobility
- Weight and fat loss
- More energy, less fatigue and better sleep
- Less anxiety and depression
- Meet and socialize with new friends in your community

It’s Game On in Your Senior Years!

Many seniors nowadays are making the most of their leisure time with skiing, hockey, golf, swimming or spinning (that’s bikes, not yarn!) to stay healthy. Here’s just a few of the activities you can participate in to stay healthy.

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How Often Should You Exercise?

All older adults should strive to exercise regularly for at least 30 minutes per day, in intervals of 10 minutes or more at least three times per week.

TO DO Your Fitness Checklist

- Have you seen your doctor recently for a check-up and spoken to them about increasing your physical activity?
- Does your average week include fitness and/or physical activities that stimulate your muscles and heart?
- Do you try to find different opportunities throughout your day
to stay active? (i.e. walk instead of driving, using the stairs instead of an elevator)?

**Nutrition for a Balanced Life**

The older we get, the more important it is to make good food choices that keep our minds sharp, our energy levels high and our bodies strong. If you’re not getting enough food, or enough of the right vitamins or nutrients in your food, this can result in bone loss, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis—all of which increase your risk of falling. Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide provides you with general guidelines on the foods you need to maintain or improve your health. This Guide is available on Health Canada’s website (www.hc-sc.gc.ca) or through 1-866-225-0709.

Here’s a quick guide to the types of healthy foods that should always be on your shopping list.

- **Fruits (frozen or fresh)** - blueberries, raspberries, and dark cherries are ideal fruits, loaded with vitamins and antioxidants.

- **Vegetables (frozen or fresh)** - especially dark, leafy ones like spinach, kale, and Swiss chard.

- **Dairy** - incredibly important for Calcium and Vitamin D. Include low-fat or non-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese in your grocery cart.

- **Whole grains** - Important for B vitamins and fibre. Explore oatmeal, whole wheat breads and pastas, and grains such as quinoa, which is also very high in protein.

- **Meat and Fish** - Focus on lean meats such as skinless chicken and turkey breasts, which supply protein and vitamin B-12. For fish, choose oily fish like salmon for their Omega-3 fatty acids, which help fight bad cholesterol.

**TO DO**

**Your Nutrition Checklist**

- Check: Are you getting enough calcium rich foods and Vitamin D?
- Check: Do you eat a variety of foods from each food group every day?
- Check: Do you ever miss or skip meals? Skipping meals can cause weakness or dizziness, putting you at greater risk for a fall.
- Check: Do you choose leaner meats, poultry and fish, as well as dried lentils, peas and beans?
- Check: Do you regularly buy lower fat milk and other foods?
- Check: Do you choose whole grain and enriched breads, pastas and cereals?
- Check: Are you ever dehydrated? Eight glasses of water per day is recommended for optimal health.
Keeping Track of Your Medications

As we age, the medicines we take may react differently in our bodies, which can increase our risk of falling. If you’re taking multiple medications to treat different health conditions, you need to be even more careful. There are a greater number of side effects associated with multiple medication use and the side effects can be more intense. Interactions between medications that do occur can also cause side effects.

Tips for Safe Medication Use

- Keep a list of all your prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications, as well as all dietary and herbal supplements that you are taking. Show this list to each doctor and pharmacist you visit.

- Ask if a newly prescribed medication or supplement replaces something else, if it is an addition to your other medications, or interacts with anything else you are taking.

- Take your medications as labeled, whether prescription or over-the-counter.

- Throw away old or expired medications from your medicine cabinet.

- Remember to monitor your heart rate, blood pressure, or blood sugar at home, as recommended by your physician.

- Report any side effects of your medication to your doctor.

- Remember that alcohol interacts with many medications, often making the adverse effects of the medications worse.

- Each time you receive a new medication make sure you discuss with your doctor or pharmacist, understand why you are taking it, be aware of any possible side effects, and understand the precautions and alternatives to taking it. **You have the right to ask!** Add every new medication to your medication record list.

- Watch for medications that make you drowsy or dizzy. Discuss medication options (i.e. changing the dose or medication) with your doctor or pharmacist.

- If you have trouble opening medication bottles, ask your pharmacist about using regular lids on your medication bottles or providing your prescriptions in pre-filled dosettes or blister packs. Your medication will be arranged for each day for a period of one or two weeks by morning, lunch, dinner and evening.

- Alcohol can react with many common medications and may affect your balance. These include sleeping pills, cold or allergy medications, tranquilizers, high blood pressure pills and pain medications. Choose low safe limits of alcohol. Low risk drinking guidelines recommend no more than two standard drinks on any day. Limit your weekly intake to 9 drinks or fewer for women and 14 drinks or fewer for men. (i.e. 1 standard drink is 1 bottle of beer or 4 oz. of wine or 1 oz. of alcohol.

- Always take your medications as directed. If
you have uncomfortable or undesirable side effects, tell your physician or pharmacist immediately. If you miss a dose, do not double your dose the next time.

**Seeing Multiple Doctors? Stick with One Pharmacist for All Your Prescriptions!**

You can often have several doctors: a general practitioner, a heart specialist, a rheumatologist, etc. And one specialist doesn’t always know what prescriptions the others are giving you. That’s where using one pharmacist can help. Your pharmacist will let you know if your multiple prescriptions could cause an adverse reaction or an overdose, and can contact your doctors if necessary.

**TO DO**

**Medication Safety Checklist**

☐ Have you made a list of all your medications (prescription, over-the-counter and herbal)?

☐ Have you shared and/or made copies of your medication list for your doctors, pharmacist, caregivers and/or family?

☐ Do you fully read the prescription and dosage instructions on your medicine containers, and take them exactly as prescribed?

☐ Do you know what alternative steps to take if you forget to take your medication? (You should not double your next dose before checking with a pharmacist.)

☐ Do you read the information leaflets of the medicines you take to fully understand side effects, or possible complications of combining one medicine with another?

**Taking Care of Your Vision**

If you’re suffering from vision loss, whether brought on by age or a stroke, you already know how frightening and difficult this is. If the physical challenges weren’t enough, age-related vision diseases can also increase your risk and fear of falling. Cataracts and glaucoma alter older people’s depth perception, peripheral vision and sensitivity to glare.

**Eye-care Tips**

- Schedule regular visits with your optometrist and/or ophthalmologist. This helps monitor your vision and increase opportunities for early diagnosis and intervention for age-related eye diseases such as cataracts and glaucoma.

- Apply brightly colored tape or stickers on the balance-aiding objects in your home (e.g. grab bars and handrails).

- In your home, add contrasting color strips to the first and last steps on your staircase to identify changes of level.

- Clean eye glasses often to improve visibility.

- Consult your doctor or an optometrist with any questions about your vision.
Healthy Vision Checklist

☐ Have you had your eyes tested in the last twelve months? It is important to have your eyes tested annually as physical changes take place in the eyes as we age. Always have someone else drive if the doctor puts drops in your eyes to dilate them during your eye exam.

☐ Have you recently changed your eyeglass prescription or received new eye glasses? When wearing new eyewear, take care walking at first, especially on stairs. New bifocals and trifocals sometimes require a period of adjustment.
HOME SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS
The easiest way to reduce your risk of injuries is to "fall-proof" your home as much as possible. A cluttered, poorly lit home is an accident waiting to happen.

Review these simple steps for making your home safer. To be most effective, tour your home room-by-room, as well as outside in the garden and garage, to help identify any areas of potential falling risk.

Inside Your Home

General Safety Tips

- Remove loose rugs or secure them with slip-resistant tape.
- Increase the lighting in your home to help compensate for vision impairment. This can be done, either with brighter bulbs (75 watt bulbs are recommended) or with more standing lamps and night lights.
- Consider installing lighted light switches to avoid fumbling in the dark.
- Get into the habit of always closing all cabinets and drawers to avoid trips and falls.
- When possible, avoid, low, short furniture, such as small ottomans.
- Have an upholsterer re-stuff an old, deflated sofa and attach furniture risers under it for height. Higher chairs and sofas, with solid armrests are easier to get in and out of, and are better for your back.
- Keep floors clear of telephone, computer and electrical cords.

Steps and Stairs

- Many people get in the habit of leaving objects on the stairs, to take upstairs later. This becomes a tripping hazard. Keep your stairs clutter-free.
- Make sure carpets and runners are securely fastened. Avoid placing loose rugs at tops or bottoms of stairs.
- Install an additional handrail so that you have a handrail on both sides of the stairs. Keep at least one hand on a rail at all times.
- Get light switches installed at the top and bottom of the stairway.
- Mark the edges of wooden steps clearly with bright non-skid tape or treads.
- Ladies, if you wear high heels, do not wear them around the house, or when going up or down stairs. Consider taking high-heel shoes in a bag with you to occasions where you need them, so you’re wearing safer flat shoes for your actual transportation.

Bathroom Safety

- Use rubber mats or adhesive non-skid strips in the bathtub and/or shower floor.
- Replace loose rugs with slip-resistant ones in front of the bathtub or toilet to prevent slipping when exiting or entering the tub, or getting on and off the toilet.
• Check for loose floor tiles which can be a tripping hazard at night.

• Install grab bars inside the shower and above the bathtub to help you enter and exit safely while bathing.

• If you prefer showers to baths, consider using a bath seat with a handheld shower for more comfort and decreased risk of falls.

• If you’re concerned about your balance, use an elevated and adjustable toilet seat with handles.

• Consider mounting secure grab bars on the wall around the toilet to make both sitting and rising easier and safer.

• Make sure electrical cords from hair dryers or shavers are safely stored and off the floor.

• If you, or a loved one, need caregiver assistance while bathing, remove glass sliding shower doors and replace them with easier-to-access shower curtains.

Bedroom Safety

• Keep a telephone, lamp and flashlight beside your bed to ensure you’re never left fumbling in the dark.

• Install some self-adhesive battery-powered wall lights or night lights to light your path from the bedroom to the bathroom.

• If you feel unsteady, place a stable chair or bedside handrail beside your bed so you can easily get in and out.

• If you use a cane or walker, make sure it is within easy reach before you go to bed.

Kitchen Safety

• Remove throw rugs or secure them with slip-resistant tape.

• Get loose tiles fixed.

• Keep dishes, pantry foods, and utensils for cooking within easy reach in waist-high cabinets that are easily accessible.

• Do NOT climb chairs to reach upper cabinets and shelves. Instead, use a step stool, ideally one with an attached handrail for extra support.

Outside Your Home

Unsafe surroundings contribute to falls and are the leading cause of injury around the home.

Outside the House

• Keep walkways and stairs around the house, free from cracks, holes and obstructions.

• Remove moss, wet leaves, ice, snow, and any other debris from walking areas.

• Keep eavestroughs over entrances clear to avoid water overflow and ice buildup.

• Install sturdy handrails on both sides of stairs to the entranceway of your home.
• Consider installing a ramp with handrails. Contact your occupational therapist and building contractor for advice on safe ramp construction.

• Make sure entrances and driveway areas that you use every day are well lit.

• Get stairs, ramps and walkways finished with a non-slip surface sealer. Wood surfaces can be especially slippery after frost or rain. Consider using a broom to add texture when pouring new concrete.

• When faced with an icy or snowy stairway, grip the handrail with both hands, turn sideways to face the railing and go up or down moving one foot at a time. Try to keep your head as level as possible to keep your balance.

• To avoid falling on ice, keep both feet flat and pressed to the ice. Shuffle one foot forward in the direction you want to go followed by shuffling the other foot in the same direction. You can also shuffle sideways.

• Keep your yard, lawn and garage floor free of hazards such as tools, hoses, grease or oil.

• In winter, keep a container with a mixture of sand and salt or ice melt in both your car and at the entrance of your home. Sprinkle some on your way to your vehicle or from your vehicle to your home to allow safe passage over icy areas.
WHAT TO DO IF YOU FALL
• Don’t Panic: Stay quiet for a minute and assess the situation.

• Make a decision whether or not to get up.

If you do try to get up:

• Use stable furniture for help.

• Take time to recover.

• Tell someone you had a fall. Seek medical advice if necessary.

If you can’t get up:

• Try sliding or crawling to seek help.

• Try to access a phone, front door, personal alarm, mobile phone, or even an open window or door to make a loud noise or yell for help.

• Make yourself comfortable and warm until help arrives.
Contact your local home health care specialist for more information.

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